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[unclassifieds](#)

Derailroaded: Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer

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This documentary about the hard life and troubled times of paranoid schizophrenic and manic depressive musical outsider Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer is about to be released on DVD.

Rock 'n' roll's byways are littered with those who took a wrong turning at the crossroads and wound up lost. Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer went further down the road-to-nowhere than most.

Institutionalised for threatening his mother with a knife when he was 16, in 1968 he found success - or at least cult recognition - for his Zappa-produced double album 'An Evening With Wild Man Fischer', four sides of howls, yelps, yodels and rambling tales of personal trauma. Zappa subsequently excommunicated Fischer for throwing a bottle at his infant daughter Moon Unit, only the first example here of Fischer's erratic behaviour. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and manic depression, Fischer has spent nearly 40 years living hand-to-mouth while struggling to convince the record industry he is, in his own words, "the best rock singer in the world."

Josh Rubin's film tells Fischer's sad but touching story. It opens with Larry, now a grizzled sixty-odd, looking after his Aunt's dogs, worried about snipers and afraid that Steven Spielberg is out to get him. Though clearly ill, he has an indomitable spirit that still drives him to compose and perform. Rubin mixes extensive footage from the 1960s and 1970s with new film of Fischer as he goes about his daily life. Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh, Zappa (in archive footage) and his widow Gail, Weird Al Yankovic, and producers Barnes and Barnes are among those who offer their thoughts on Fischer's pure intentions, as well as his inclination towards self-sabotage and hard-to-handle behaviour.

Rubin's principle thesis is that Fischer blazed a trail for 'outsider' music - the distant arm of pop that values sincere personal expression over conventional skill or commercial success. Fischer's songs, frequently composed on the spot and delivered in an acappella yowl, flow from him pretty much constantly, and amid the stream-of consciousness are ripples of his mental illness. "I wish I didn't have a head like a ping-pong ball," he wails, still deeply resentful towards his mother and his loveless childhood.

Fischer's post-Zappa career hasn't been without its highlights. There were early appearances on 'Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In', a duet with Rosemary Clooney and a clutch of albums. He became the subject of a graphic novel too, which told the alarming tale of the time he defecated in a stranger's wardrobe. And, as he wryly puts it here, he was in at the launch of a global empire - US indie label Rhino Records - whose first release, 'Go To Rhino Records', Fischer composed during a visit to the LA record store. ("Where are the records?/They're over there/They're all over the place!").

In a sense, the musical aspect of the film is incidental; instead it's about an ageing and anguished ex-freak still dreaming, probably hopelessly, of stability and professional success. Larry isn't really put up for analysis, some of the interviews are rather pale, and though Rubin wants to cast his subject as a misunderstood genius, in reality Larry's just ill.

Despite these flaws, Rubin's affection for Fischer shines through, and

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[February 2011](#)
[January 2011](#)
[December 2010](#)
[November 2010](#)
[October 2010](#)
[September 2010](#)
[August 2010](#)
[July 2010](#)
[June 2010](#)
[May 2010](#)
[April 2010](#)
[March 2010](#)
[February 2010](#)
[January 2010](#)
[November 2009](#)

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Despite these flaws, Rubin's direction for Fischer shines through, and though the lesson to be drawn is sad, it's pertinent all the same: while rock 'n' roll likes to pretend to be in love with those camped out on the edge, when confronted with those who, like Fischer, are stuck there 24-7, it can be significantly less accommodating.

Merry Go Round by Wild Man Fischer *Three*

An Evening With Wild Man Fischer



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